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CHAPTER III

CHILDHOOD

CHILDHOOD is primarily the time of education. How are the ideals and patterns of behaviour of this Melanesian society in Lesu set before the child? In what manner does the child make his transition to adult life? These are among the important problems of education. In discussing childhood, it will occasionally be necessary to differentiate between early and later periods, the former between the end of the suckling period (the age of two and three years) to the age of about six, and the latter from six to puberty.

After the nursing period the child is no longer the pet of the whole community, for by this time some other newborn baby, who is being fondled and petted by everyone, probably has taken his place. But while there is a lessening of the affectionate demonstrativeness shown to the infant, the attitude of both the adults and older children is that of careful attention to the young child. It is merely the fondling and petting which are omitted. Children from three to six are rarely left alone. They are either with their parents in the village, or, if the latter are away in the gardens or fishing, they are with their older brothers and sisters, classificatory ones if there are no real ones. Larat, a little girl of about ten, frequently watches over her classificatory son,[1] who is just at the end of his infancy. She holds the little boy as she sings one of the dancing songs. Lamai, a boy of about ten, looks after his younger brother Lisit very well, and is all attention when Lisit cries.

When the parents are in the village the little children follow them about. They are present at all the adult activities—dance rehearsals, rites, communal preparations of food, etc.—

[1] In this case her mother's sister's daughter's son.

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and thus their education is begun in the observance of those activities, in which they will later participate. Occasionally they carry small, light articles, such as a basket for taro, from the house to the beach for their parents. The world of early childhood is composed of adults and older children, both of whom stand in the role of protectors, and the parents have the additional role of disciplinarians.

It is in this early period, following infancy, that parental discipline begins. If these young children are disobedient, they are spanked. Quite early the youngsters are told to go to their respective places (according to their sex) to defecate. When an infant who cannot walk defecates in public, the faeces are quickly covered with sand. But as soon as the child can walk about by himself he is supposed to go to his proper place. But accidents often happen, and not infrequently the young child urinates on the beach or in front of the house. He appears to have no embarrassment about it, and is interested in his own act, but not in that of another child. If observed by his mother the child is spanked or scolded, or perhaps both.

Children are early taught to obey the instructions of their parents. Linga, a little girl of about four, was told to throw some leaves left over from the cooking into the sea. She did not do it, and her mother slapped her face. She cried. Later her father, Tukan, took her to a tree where another man threw some of the fruit down to her. She returned, clinging affectionately to her father's hand. It is usual that if one parent quarrels with the child, the other will take the child's part. And this applies not only to parents but to other relatives, and a parent takes his child's side should the latter be chided by another relative. One day a child of about seven was struck by one of his clan relatives because he would not give him betel-nut when requested. The mother was absent when the incident occurred. She and her sister returned and found the child crying, and learning the cause

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of the tears, the two women each took a branch of a small tree and fought the man who had struck the child. The other members of the hamlet thought that the man got what he deserved.

Another time, Bak, a little girl of about ten, took some leaves from Bolut's banana tree, and he scolded her because he thought the destruction of the leaves would weaken his tree. Bak's adopted mother, Brakko, with whom she lived, took her part. Brakko had recently given Bolut some bananas for a feast which he was to hold in the near future. When she heard of the scolding he had given her adopted daughter, she remarked to a group of people, "Ah, yes, he scolds Bak, but why did he take my bananas to his hamlet then?" The remark was promptly carried to Bolut, and he as promptly returned the bananas. Brakko had taken Bak's part by her allusion to Bolut's having accepted a gift from her. Bolut's feelings had been hurt by this allusion, and he vindicated himself by returning the gift. The incident was soon forgotten. In most personal quarrels with his adult relatives the child does not lack a defender. On the other hand, when the children offend the whole community, there is no defence for them. Some youngsters picked unripe fruit from a tree, and all the adults of the hamlet who were present, male and female, scolded the children, who hurriedly ran back to the bush and threw the unripe fruit away.

Just one manner of frightening children was observed. It is done with a leaf called *grippo*, which is linked with ghosts who are feared by everyone. The leaf is waved in front of the child and an allusion made to ghosts. I was unable to get any further information on it. When observing the children's fear of this leaf, it seemed to me that it was similar to the fear a child in our society will sometimes have of a feather. The use of the leaf in this connection was not very frequent, and the frightening of the children by connecting the leaf with ghosts was half playful.

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856 Discipline during the early period of childhood is not very severe. Children are to do as they are told; their duties are light and consist mostly in fetching and carrying small articles for their parents; a spanking is the penalty for disobedience. One child who lived in my hamlet cried more often than the others, though as far as I could observe she was no less obedient than the other children. But her mother had a decidedly quick temper, was irritated more easily than the other women of the hamlet, and had very little self-control. The father was easy-going, and the child frequently ran to him after she had been slapped by her mother. But it does not happen often that an adult's irritation is vented on the child. Respect for the wishes and commands of their elders is also impressed upon the children by their observation of adult behaviour. They see their own parents meeting the wishes of the grandparents, and always it is the oldest people present who are the most important.

PLAY

857 When the children are not bystanders or assistants in some adult activity, they can usually be found on the beach, or playing in the shallow water off the reef. They may be making holes in the sand and forming small balls out of the moist sand, which they throw into the water or up into the air to see how far they will go, or there will be a frolic while they bathe in the sea. Throwing stones at birds they also find amusing. Accompanied by children of about ten, they may go to the bush to look for the *nownowg nuts* (specie of almond), or a small group of children may sit and chatter about what their parents are doing: the mother is planting in the garden, the father is putting a new roof on the house; or conversation may turn to what they have in the house to eat, perhaps the fact that there are plenty of bananas will be commented upon. Climbing trees to get a fresh coconut is another part

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An affectionate relationship between a child and maternal uncle is also usual. Food and tobacco are frequently given by the mother's brother to his nephews and nieces. The relationship is a friendly, affectionate, gift-giving one. The children may eat with the mother's brother, but they never sleep in his house. They sleep in their parents' house, except the older boys, who use the men's house. The mother's brother is not the disciplinarian. If a scolding or spanking is due it is the duty of one of the parents. The maternal uncle does not even seem to be particularly concerned with his niece's or nephew's conduct. That is their parent's business. When Batu, a young, unmarried girl, stayed away very late one night, it was her parents who sat up and worried because they did not know her whereabouts. Her maternal uncle was fast asleep in his house and did not even know of his niece's absence. Also in minor details, such as defecation, assisting in the daily tasks, it is the parents who both command and discipline.

There is also a very affectionate relationship between parallel cousins of the opposite sex, such as a girl and her mother's sister's son. An affectionate attitude is shown in public between these two. For instance, one girl who had just reached puberty and her cousin, who was several years older, walked around hand-in-hand, or with arms thrown carelessly around each other, and playfully fondled each other. The same kind of affectionate playfulness exists between grandparents and grandchildren and a maternal uncle and his niece. To the foreign observer it is more noticeable in the behaviour between the cousins mentioned above, probably because of their similarity in age. In this parallel cousin relationship, it must be noted that the two are of the same clan and the kinship term between them is that of brother and sister. One sees much more demonstration of affection between these cousins who call themselves brother and sister than between real brothers

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and sisters, between whom a semi-taboo relationship begins at puberty. But although there is no demonstration of affection between them, in childhood real brothers and sisters play together.

The real force of taboo relationships does not make itself felt until after puberty. The most important of these, as has been indicated, are the cross-cousin relationships, that is, between a girl and her mother's brother's son and her father's sister's son. At the same time that the child learns the personal names of other relatives, he learns that personal names in this cross-cousin relationship must never be spoken, and that the term *koko* (the diminutive of *korup*) is used instead. He sees the avoidance between the adults who stand in this relationship, and he, too, avoids his *koko*, although perhaps not quite so actively as do the adults. Thus a child sees his father leave the compound when the maternal grandmother comes to visit them. Since the children spend most of their time on the outskirts of the adult world, they have full opportunity to observe patterns of behaviour between taboo and other relatives, as well as to learn how to scrape taro and handle the fishing-net.

Education here is for the most part a subtle process. From infancy, children are bystanders in the adult world. Wherever the adults are gathered, there also are the children, watching them as they perform their tasks, assisting in them within their strength, and listening to the conversations, on which there are no bars because of the presence of children. Obscene stories, scandal, gossip of all kinds, are repeated openly before children of all ages. There is one exception, and this is not a matter of age but of kinship; a mother does not discuss her sexual life before her daughter, whether that daughter be a tot of five or a middle-aged woman. She will talk about her sexual life before other women, and she will discuss another woman's sexual life before her daughter, but not her own *affaires du cœur*. She gives as her reason that she is

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ashamed.[1] As far as I could ascertain, I think the same kind of shame exists between a father and his son, but I did not have the opportunity of investigating this matter fully, because I was so much more with the women than with the men in the casual, everyday, gossipy life, which is the time when this type of observation could best be made.

INSTRUCTION IN FOLK-TALES AND MYTHS

One aspect of the child's education is not so subtle. Definite instruction is given in the telling of folk-tales and myths. Sometimes the children may learn them casually as they sit around the campfires at night with the adults, but to assure the children's real knowledge of this folk literature, there is a period lasting three or four weeks during which the adult males and females tell the children tales at night around the fire. A feast marks the completion of this period for the relation of folk tales. The tales are very much in the nature of Aesop's Fables, in that many of them point a moral. Etiquette, taboos, customs, are all illustrated in these narratives, as is also the punishment for those who break taboos and customs. The best illustrations are some of the tales themselves. The following are a few:

> An old woman tells her two grandchildren not to take a certain path. She points to it and says: "This is not a good path. You must not go on it. There are bananas on this path and they are ripe, but you must not eat them." Then she points to another path as the one the children are to take.
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> The next day the old woman sends the two children for some water and again reminds them that they are not to take the taboo path. But the children walk down

[1] In our own society most parents do not like to discuss their sex interests with their own children. The question of whether this is a universal characteristic between parents and children is for further investigation.

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584 Tomerae is a married man from the bush village of Lenopil. He came to the beach village of Lesu, and while there he was told that another man wanted to marry his wife. Tomerae agreed, and accepted the return of his marriage payment.

Several Lesu people now suggested to him that he marry Pakamus, a young girl who had been betrothed, but whose intended husband had recently choked to death over a fish-bone. To this suggestion Tomerae at first said "No," more from coyness or shyness than from unwillingness. A little later he returned to his bush village, and on the way passed the garden where Pakamus' mother was working. He stopped and cleared some ground for her, to indicate that he was willing to marry her daughter. The mother, however, asked him directly, and he replied "Yes."

He continued to Lenopil, and when he arrived there told his clan relatives that he wanted all his pigs and *tsera*, which they had been holding for him. To questions from his relatives, he replied that he was going to marry a girl from the village of Lesu. They wanted to know what was wrong with the bush girls. He said he did not want any of them and had determined to marry Pakamus from Lesu. So he collected his property, returned to Lesu, and married Pakamus.

858 861 We have observed the preparation of the child for adult life; the discipline he undergoes; his gradual knowledge of and participation in adult activities; his play; the beginning of kinship patterns; his instructions in folklore, and, in general, his education. We have noted the age-grouping of boys in play, but no similar grouping of girls.

We find in Lesu no childhood world completely separated from the adult one, nor one with different ideals. Instead we find the children always observers or minor participants of the adult society. As soon as they are able to toddle, the children learn the line of sex division in social life. At all rites, and in social life, the boys are with the men and the

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little girls with their mothers. A little boy of five accompanies his father to the feast in the cemetery, while his sister remains outside with her mother. They learn their future occupations by first observing and then gradually participating in the activity. They are interested witnesses to trading and other economic transactions, all of which are made in public. They hear the speeches in which reciprocity is the underlying note, observe how the payments are made, and know who has attained the most prestige. They listen to the speeches in which the women extol their husbands as good workers, or shame them for their laziness. Quite early they learn to do as they are told by their parents, and observe in the village life the respect for and the authority of the old men and women. They notice kinship patterns of behaviour among the adults and begin to practise some of them themselves. The incest taboo is impressed upon them even in their play. During all this time they have been surrounded with affection and care from both their parents and their clan relatives. Among the boys special friendships are formed, but these seem to be lacking among the girls.

Because it is the life they have been observing ever since they have been able to take notice, by the time these children have reached puberty they are well trained for their adult life, which now begins, They have heard the ideals and patterns of adult behaviour set forth in speeches, discussions, gossip, and folk-tales, and they have seen them functioning in life. No other standards or ideals have been set before the child. He has not had held before him one type of behaviour in economic transactions, or some other aspect of life, only to learn later that this is not the actual practice. These Melanesian children receive a realistic type of education.